

ZipUSA

RICO, COLORADO

Make no mistake about it,
this is NOT Telluride

81332

BY CAROL HORNER

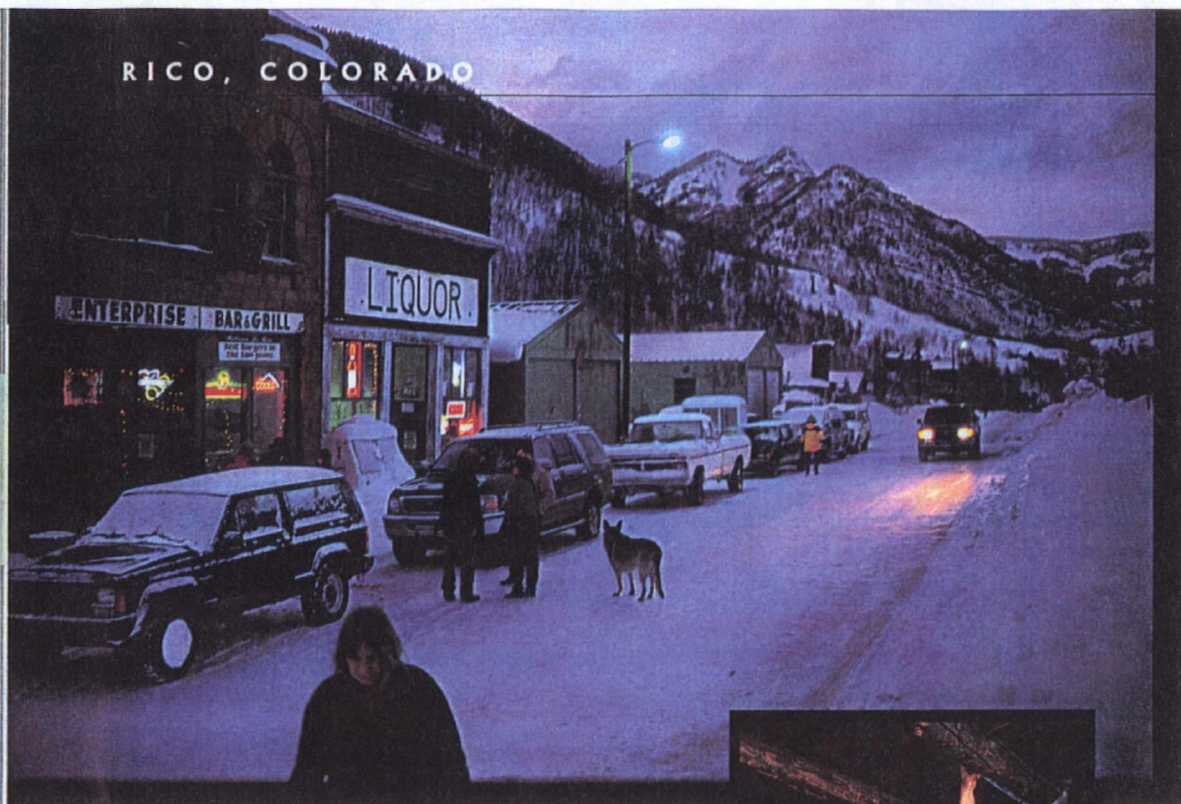
PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID ALAN HARVEY

The tiny town of Rico, Colorado, lies near the base of Expectation Mountain, rightly so. Born in 1879 as a silver mining camp, Rico, which means "rich" in Spanish, is home to about 140 souls year-round, twice that in summer. It has always been a place of lavish dreams that come and go in a boom-and-bust cycle mimicking the seasons that turn Expectation and other peaks cupping the town from green to gold to white to green again.

Steve Fabian hugs his
"guardian angel," June
Carter, in the Enterprise
Bar & Grill. Rico's
century-old watering hole
has since shut down,
but "It never stays closed
too long," Carter says.



RICO, COLORADO



With his self-built octagonal cabin and his job at Motherlode Liquor, "Big Jim" Britton likes Rico pretty much the way it is.

It's bust now, locals agree, but they expect things to change in a Rico kind of way, which means very slowly. If any issue stirs residents these days, it's development, how much and what kind to allow, if any. In the mid-1990s a handful of investors calling themselves Rico Renaissance came to town, expecting to create a real estate boom like the one in nearby Telluride, which has turned itself into a resort full of condominiums, high-end shops and restaurants, and multimillion-dollar homes. But the developers encountered resistance, and so far almost nothing has happened.

That suits Jim Britton just fine. A gray-bearded man, 6 feet 3 inches tall and over 300 pounds, "Big Jim," as he's known, manages Motherlode Liquor on Rico's main street. He was sitting out front reading a book about Civil War battles when I walked up one afternoon last summer. Drawn to mountain life, Jim, 57, moved west from Ohio soon after college and a stint as a medical supply clerk in the Army. He said he used to enjoy hunting, but now "I guess I have sort of a Bambi complex," and he has quit cross-country skiing because his knees are messed up. But he has fun playing music with friends; his instrument is a jaw harp.

"My big deal during the summertime is getting my firewood in," Jim said. He's a six-cord-a-year man, he told me later as he showed me around his octagonal solar-powered log cabin. He is proud of the house, which he built in 1981 while camping out during the warmer months. "I didn't have the amount of money to buy a house, probably didn't even have the credit background for a mortgage."

He has a propane-powered range and refrigerator and a woodstove he



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heats and cooks with in winter. He got rid of his phone a couple of years ago but has a 21-inch television that gets a decent over-the-air signal from NBC and, in daylight hours, from CBS. He thinks he's the last person in Rico without a satellite dish. Jim shares the house with cats Tuxedo and Evander, who has a split ear. Jim is against large-scale growth in Rico but fears he might be outnumbered now.

The Rico Renaissance folks do still hover, hoping to win cooperation, but no one who knows Rico expects it to be transformed anytime soon. Some 8,827 feet high in the San Juan Mountains, this remote town numbered 5,000 in its 1892 heyday and had about 400 residents as late as the early 1950s. It dwindled to double digits after the last mine shut down in 1977 and was pretty much left for dead. Even in midsummer I found only a few businesses operating on the 0.6 of a mile of State Route 145 that doubles as main street. Rico has no school, no doctor, no drugstore or grocery store, no local police. But in the past decade, the population has inched up.

Any comeback has been fueled by the high price of life in Telluride, 28 miles to the north. Rico's 33-year-old town manager and attorney, Eric Heil, said he saw the middle class, including himself, pushed out of there by the cost of housing. In Rico the consensus favors planned growth. "We just want to grow into a functioning town," he said.

You can't hold much of a conversation with anyone in Rico without Telluride being brought up as what they *don't* want to become. They shudder at being called a bedroom community for their pricey neighbor, but they admit that a lot of Rico people work in Telluride, often in construction, or have spouses who work there.

Even some who stand to make more money if Rico gets bigger are cautious about change. "The smallness and intimacy of this community is why we're here," said Brigitte Wilson, behind the counter of her gift shop, Mountain Mama's Trading Co. "If you lose that closeness, you lose that feeling of being part of a family."

"We are so rural we're termed 'Frontier Medicine,'" says Scott Chandler, giving a practice IV at the fire station.



Denver ★

Rico

81332

POPULATION: about 140

POPULATION IN

1892: 5,000

SELL-OUT CROWD AT RICO

THEATRE AND CAFÉ: 350

NUMBER OF PAVED

ROADS: 1

NEAREST TRAFFIC LIGHT:

50 miles

NUMBER OF PLACES

YOU CAN BUY ALCOHOL

(WHEN THE ENTERPRISE

BAR & GRILL ISN'T SHUT

DOWN): 5

NUMBER OF PLACES

YOU CAN BUY A LOAF OF

BREAD: 1

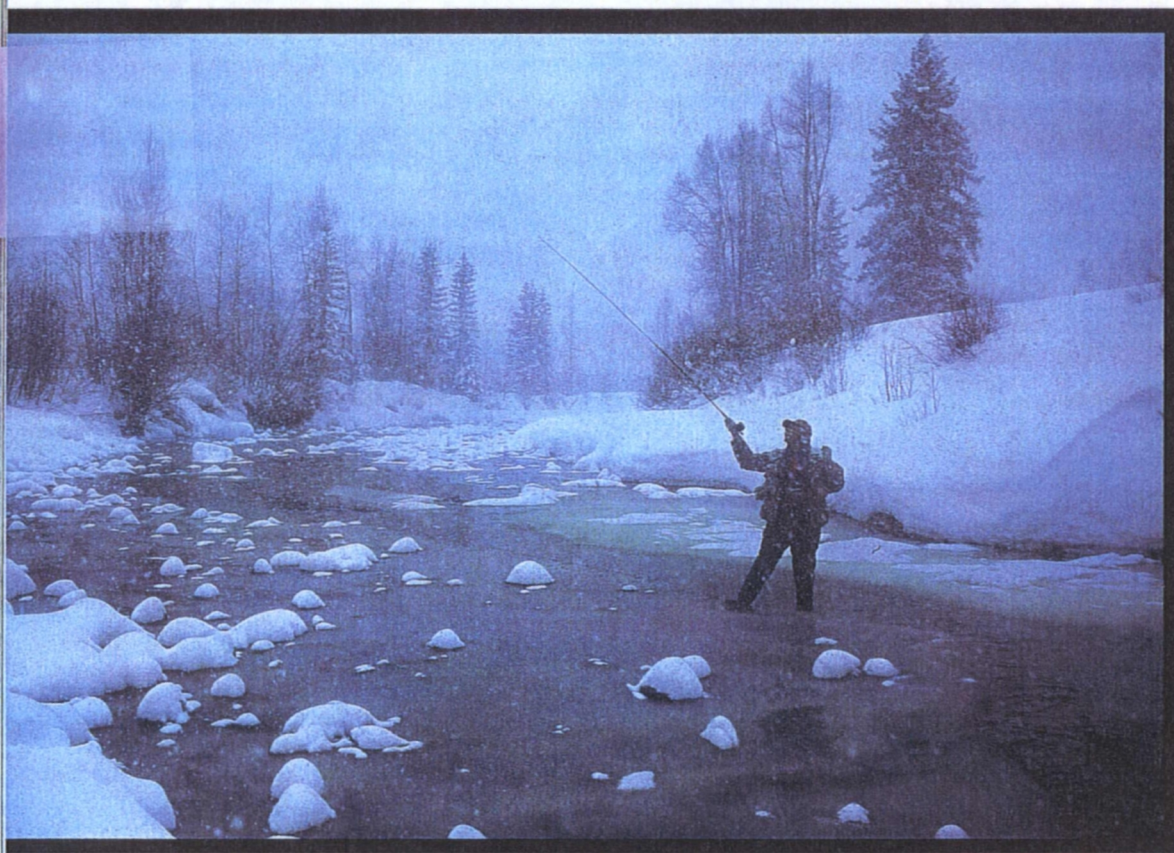
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I saw what she meant about family at the monthly town board meeting. The liquor license for the Enterprise Bar & Grill came under challenge, and the town clerk reported that the bar's manager, who didn't show up at the meeting, was about \$800 behind in water bills. The Enterprise is one of only two watering holes in town. It has a more frontier-like atmosphere than the Rico Theatre and Café, lending credence to rumors that a couple of women had once danced topless on the bar. Referring to the manager by his first name, board members wrestled with whether to shut down his operation. They talked about the chances he'd been given and would yet be given to make things right. But they voted to close the bar.

Standing on the steps of town hall after the meeting, Erin Johnson, a Rico Renaissance lawyer who lives in Cortez, said meetings like the one

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Even on his days off, fly-fishing guide Dave Hill takes to the river. "If a person's into glitz, Rico's not for them."

we just sat through—"too informal, too uninformed"—would eventually be a thing of the past. The developers want to "look at everybody's objectives. This town is gonna absolutely take off as soon as they get a sewer system. It's gonna hit like *that*," Johnson said, snapping her fingers.

As we talked, I could see Eric Heil striding down the hill to have a last beer at the Enterprise and order the place shut down. When word got out, no one seemed too upset. The Enterprise was always opening and closing, they said, and soon enough the manager would recoup or someone else would step forward to run it. □